

BOOK REVIEW of *Conceptualizing the Process of Radicalization among Ethnic and Religious Groups*

Georgi Stankov, Ph.D.¹

Received: 17.10.2024
Available online: 20.12.2024

Abstract

Petar Atanassov. *Conceptualizing the Process of Radicalization among Ethnic and Religious Groups*. Plovdiv: Publishing Complex VUSI. 2024. 227 pages. ISBN (print): 978-610-7774-02-3

The reviewed book seeks to summarise and analyse the factors that influence the emergence and development of the radicalization processes on ethnic and religious bases, as well as their subsequent impact on national and international security. Through critical involvement with the existing theories and paradigms, the author develops a specific perspective on radicalization processes in the modern world. With a background of a professional historian and building on direct observations of public life in several countries, Petar Atanassov boldly delves into present-day and historical appearances of complicated social and political phenomena pertinent to radicalization. The study outlines the factors related to ethno-religious radicalization such as migration processes, social discrimination, religious propaganda, collective utopias, terrorism, etc. The author scrutinises a number of factors of radicalization, such as propaganda messages, instrumentalization of social problems for the purposes of radicalizing elements, and introduces a review of empirical data on the social profile of radicals in contemporary societies and on existing programs for de-escalation and de-radicalization of at-risk communities, for rehabilitation and reintegration of persons who participated in extremist groups, etc.

Keywords: radicalization, ethnic groups, religious groups

JEL: Y30

¹ Researcher, Laboratory on the Problems of the Black Sea and the Caspian Region at The Higher School of Security and Economics – Plovdiv, Bulgaria; e-mail address: info@vusi.bg, dunyata@gmail.com

The topic of ethnic or religious radicalization is not new to researchers. In the academic literature, there is a huge body of research devoted to an earlier clash in Western societies – the so-called “class struggle” waged by far-left illegal groups. These highly radicalized Marxist-Leninist groups used a variety of extremist tactics to achieve their goals and went down in history as carriers of violence and terror, often receiving aid and ideological inspiration from governments in which the “socialist revolution” had won.

After the significant pacification of the world in the last quarter of the 20th century, especially with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the communist system, these class-based movements subsided, but the 21st century brought new challenges to the security of Western societies, mainly related to the processes within them, not with an external enemy. It is about the resurgence of old conflicts - those inspired by identification with ethnic affiliations and religious ideas and seen through the perspective of the world as a field of struggle for dominance between them.

Following the development of this phenomenon, in the last two decades scholars have increasingly begun to turn their interest to the topic of ethno-religious conflicts and the fragmentation of societies along ethnic or religious lines, especially after the attacks on the World Trade Center in the United States in 2001 and on the London Underground in 2005 and 2007 (Dronzina, 2023).

It should be noted that in some cases radicalization occurs under the cumulative impact of several separate factors, which can be ethnic, religious, estate, political, even environmental and corruption, as is the case with the Fulani in Mali and Burkina Faso (Detchev, 2023). Although it is a completely new phenomenon, the author Petar Atanasov Ph.D. has not left it out of his attention.

In this context, Dr. Petar Atanasov's work *Conceptualizing the process of radicalization among ethnic and religious groups* (2024) deservedly aroused interest as a contribution to the research of the Bulgarian scientific community. The author has set himself a serious goal, thus facing a huge creative and scientific challenge - to synthesize and analyse the factors influencing the emergence and development of radicalization processes on an ethnic and religious basis, and their impact on national and international security. It can be said that he has achieved the set goal in a convincing manner.

Critically interpreting existing scientific theories and paradigms, Dr. Atanasov builds his own picture of the development of radicalization processes in the modern world. With the experience of a professional historian and a direct observer of public life in different countries, he well guides the reader, helping them to understand the general principles in the extremely complicated socio-political phenomena of the present day and their historical and cultural prerequisites, as well as the specific local characteristics of some cases.

The first chapter examines some of the main social components necessary for the conceptualization of ethno-religious radicalization: migration processes, social discrimination, religious propaganda, collective utopias, terrorism, etc.

Here, the author points out two common characteristics of all forms of radicalization: on the one hand, the feeling of inequality and injustice, and on the other hand, the combination

of a radicalization-friendly social environment and personal life trajectory. Probably, it is the subjective perception of injustice by smaller or larger social groups that is at the basis of the most serious social upheavals in the last few centuries - between classes, estates, states.

Examples such as the civil discontent that led to the French Revolution in 1789, such as the desire for national emancipation of the Hungarian people within the Austrian state, which led to the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 and then to the emergence of Austria-Hungary, such as the outrage of the German society from the Versailles Peace System of 1919 and its desire for its revision, which led to the rise of the Nazi Party, or as the propaganda propagated among the Hutu people that they were discriminated against and humiliated by the Tutsi people, which led to the Rwandan genocide in 1994, show that if there is a critical mass that has succumbed to political messages imbued with radical populism, under the right conditions its sense of injustice can be transformed into political action, including violence.

It is not by chance that nowadays the United Nations consider the principles of justice and inclusion, along with consensus building and the rule of law, to be an invariable part of the so-called "good governance" (UNESCAP, 2009). If we look at public sentiment in most European countries today, we will notice that the most current example of a sense of injustice due to the divergence between the positions of the majority of public opinion and the political elite is the EU's immigration policy. Contrary to the elite's expectations of the migrants (some came as seasonal "guest workers", others as residents of former colonies who came to their former metropolises) their integration into their host societies took place in a particular way, with the creation of ethnic and religious "ghettos" or separate neighbourhoods, where the second and third generations migrants gradually appeared.

These generations are no longer migrants, and therefore their legitimization and institutionalization as citizens of their host countries has gradually begun. Among many of them, however, there was a growing feeling that they were discriminated against and rejected in their host European societies (due to their lower educational and professional status, due to the divergence of their family and social patterns from the dominant rules of the indigenous peoples who created these societies) and that has created the conditions for growing groups of migrants to become more hostile to local cultures and to be more susceptible targets of ethno-religious radicalization, mostly associated with fundamentalist Islam.

In an identical way, but in the opposite direction, more and more native citizens of European nations began to perceive migrants as a threat, and this was the reason for right-wing populism to enter the vacated space of the conservative right, defending the foundations of traditions, values and cultural heritage in the European way of life. Thus we witness radicalization from two sides with different motivations and interpretations of the same situation.

The second chapter describes the social processes and reasons for the emergence of radical attitudes and behaviour among certain social groups with characteristic ethnic and/

or religious affiliation, as well as the impact of these processes on the national security of the countries. Multiple contexts have been described in which radicalization can originate and develop into a serious public problem and a threat to civil order and security.

Due attention is paid to the ideological narrative, to the discourse, to the way in which an ideology reaches its addressees and affects them. The author ascertains how in a state of high social tension between different groups and their opposition (regardless of the different ideological bases - be they social and revolutionary or ethnic and religious forms of radicalization) there is invariably a connection between the language of hatred and the concrete actions caused by the suggestions of this language. The UN defines hate speech as “any kind of communication in oral, written or behavioural form that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language against a person or group on the basis of who they are, in other words, on the basis of their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, origin, sex or other factor of identity” (United Nations, 2019: 2). For its part, the Council of Europe considers hate speech to be any form of:

1. Incitement to racial hatred, i.e. hatred directed against persons or groups on the basis of their belonging to a particular race.

2. Incitement to hatred on a religious basis (this includes incitement to hatred based on discrimination between believers and non-believers).

3. Incitement to other forms of hatred based on intolerance, which is “expressed through aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism” (Weber, 2009: 4).

Hate speech is the most effective way to dehumanize “others” and thereby subject them to hate crimes. Under dehumanization, the social sciences understand “the act of perceiving or treating people as if they were less than fully human” (Haslam and Stratemeyer, 2016: 25). Dehumanization can be seen as a complex of several manifestations:

- Attacking human dignity or human value as “an end in itself” and treating the person simply as a means to one’s ends;
- Treating someone like something or reducing someone to something;
- Comparing human beings to animals or inanimate objects;
- Denial of agency or distinctive human abilities;
- Psychological attitude of perceiving others as non-human (Mikkola, 2021: 326).

From the language of hatred, there is only one step to crimes inspired by hatred, which - as history teaches - under certain circumstances can grow on a large scale: religious conflicts, ethnic separatism, ethnic cleansing, terrorism, genocide. Given that “hate crime involves acts of violence and intimidation, usually directed at already stigmatized and marginalized groups” (Perry, 2001: 10), it becomes clear why hate speech precedes hate crimes - because the word creates the image of “Others”, forms the attitude and affective attitude towards them, and can motivate action and even justify it with moral arguments.

The third chapter is devoted to the factors of radicalization, such as propaganda messages, instrumentalization of social problems for the purposes of radicalizing elements, as well as a review of empirical data on the social profile of the radical in contemporary societies and on existing programs for de-escalation and de-radicalization of at-risk

communities, for rehabilitation and reintegration of persons who participated in extremist groups, etc. The British Strategy for the Prevention of Extremism, the Netherlands Action Plan against Polarization and Radicalization, the European Counter-Terrorism Strategy, as well as various models of integration and multiculturalism in Europe are presented.

In this field, there is a serious place for developing, testing and evaluating specific public policies related to the prevention of radical movements, with work to integrate marginalized and encapsulated social groups, to overcome social fragmentation and polarization in the societies of the Western world. This is an area where the social sciences would be very useful for a country like Bulgaria, which has ethnic, religious and cultural diversity and is located in a key place on the map as the main “gateway” for migrant flows from the Middle East to Europe.

A strong positive quality of the monograph is its interdisciplinary approach, which provides opportunities for the intersection of sciences such as sociology, political science, ethnology, anthropology, religious studies, international relations, public policies, administration and management. The scientific apparatus follows the scientific methods of citation and is rich in source material and empirical examples, which the author uses with correct interpretations. Conceptualizing the process of radicalization among ethnic and religious groups is required reading for any scholar interested in the scholarly debate on the topic at hand.

Perhaps the most exciting thing about this book is that it opens up many spaces for future scientific and applied projects and bridging research. After it, the reader is left with food for thought before an open question of our society: after everything we know from today's perspective from history, how can researchers and practitioners shift the focus of their work from the question “Why does this happen?” (otherwise very relevant and mandatory reference to past prerequisites and current states at the beginning of each process) to the question “How to deal with it?” (carrying the urgent need for a vision to achieve a desired future status)?

Bibliography:

- Detchev, T. (2023). “Eskalatsija na etno-religiosnoto nasilie v Zapadna i Centralna Afrika kato zapalaha za sigurnostta na stranite ot Evropejskiq sajuz” [Escalation of ethnic and religious violence in Western and Central Africa as a security threat to the EU member-states]. In: *Sbornik s dokladi ot jubileinata mezhdunarodna nauchna konferencija “Riskove pred etnoreligioznij mir v konteksta na nacionalnata i mezhdunarodnata sigurnost (v Jugoiztochna i Centralna Evropa)”* [Risks to ethno-religious peace in the context of national and international security (in South-Eastern and Central Europe)], November 3-4, 2023. Plovdiv: Publishing complex VUSI, pp. 195-209.
- Dronzina, T. (2023). *Za radikalizacijata* [On Radicalization]. Sofia: UI “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

- Haslam, N. and Stratemeyer, M. (2016). "Recent research on dehumanization." In: *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Vol. 11, pp. 25-29. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.03.009>
- Mikkola, M. (2021). Why Dehumanization Is Distinct from Objectification. In: Kronfeldner, M. (ed.). *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization*. New York: Routledge, pp. 326-340.
- Perry, B. (2001). *In the Name of Hate. Understanding Hate Crimes*. New York & London: Routledge.
- UNESCAP (2009). *What is Good Governance?* Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/good-governance.pdf> (last visited September, 2024).
- United Nations (2019). *Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech*. [Online]. Accessible at https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf.
- Weber, A. (2009). *Manual on hate speech*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.